

SAYYEDNA

Bilal

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by

**MAHMUDA
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WAHAB**

FOREWARD

Each time the heavenly message of Ahmadiyyat is accepted and imbibed by a fortunate soul in Africa, the beloved memory of Bilal is rekindled in our hearts. Bilal bin Ribah, once no more than a negro slave, rose to the exalted status of being called Sayyedna Bilal, meaning 'Our Lord Bilal'.

The degree of spiritual ascent, manifest in his case, is a unique example in itself. The honour he won is an illustration of the love he bore for the Prophet of Islam. The story of Bilal is one of perseverance, fortitude and devotion. His life has inspired and illuminated the hearts of millions of Muslims. This perspective has led the Lajna Imaillah, Karachi to bring forth a book on Bilal. This English version is the result of the efforts of Mrs. Mahmuda Amatus Sami Wahab. May Allah bountifully reward her with His graces. Ameen.

Amatul Rafique Pasha
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Lajna Imaillah, Karachi.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The story of Bilal was first published in Urdu. I was asked to translate the book. But as it was being translated, I found that the book contained only one incident of the life of Bilal. More information of his life was taken from various books. Now this version of the life of Bilal consists of the facts of his life as far as possible in a chronological order right from his birth to his death. This story has been written in order to educate children who are living abroad, and it will also be made available in the Audio-cassette form.

I would like to express my deep appreciation and gratefulness to Mrs. Shahnaz Muzaffar and her daughter Nasra Muzaffar for recording the first draft of this translation on cassette tape and also to my husband Brig. Ch. Muhammad Abdul Wahab for his kind guidance and support in preparation of this book on Bilal's life and Mr. Qazi Asad who very kindly corrected the English Text.

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NOTE

The salutation to the Holy Prophet in the words "peace and blessings of Allah be upon him" after his name and the invocation "may Allah be pleased with him" after the names of his companions are expressly set out in the manuscript but are omitted in print in order to accomodate the text to the modern reader. They should, nevertheless, be understood as repeated in each case.

SAYYEDNA BILAL

This is the story of Bilal. His father was an Arab and his mother was an Abyssinian. His father's name was Ribah and his mother's name was Hamama. He is generally known as "Bilal Habshi" i.e. Bilal the Abyssinian. He was thin and tall with dark brown complexion and thick hair. He had a Muslim brother named Khalid and a sister called Aqra.

Bilal was brought up at Mecca in a well-known Quraish tribe called Jamah. During the Days of Ignorance, the members of this tribe were considered to be experts in palmistry. Bilal's parents were slaves. In those days slaves had the lowest status in society. Slaves had to obey all orders given to them by their masters, they could never think of disobeying them. If a slave died of hard work or maltreatment, the master did not care. His only concern was the loss of money invested in the slave.

Bilal had a natural hatred for the customs and practices prevailing in the Days of Ignorance. The people in those days were devoid of good morals, kindness and of other human values. Deceit had become their second nature.

Bilal was one of the nine blessed souls who were the first to respond to the call of truth. Uncom-

promising faith in human dignity is the central theme of Islam. This was an anathema to the haughty Meccans whose power rested solely on the exploitation of the weak. They looked upon this as a natural way of life, handed down to them by their forefathers. However, there were individuals who possessed an uncanny ability to see the truth and also had dauntless courage to declare it openly. Bilal was one of these super-sensitive courageous souls.

The whole of Arabia, with exceptions here and there, believed in the polytheistic form of religion. In the Kaaba alone, the sacred place of the whole Islamic world and the house of worship built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, there were 360 idols. It seems that for every day of the lunar year, Meccans had an idol.

Every year people belonging to various tribes came to Mecca for Hajj. This was the time for complete peace in the country. Traders came from Abyssinia, Syria and Palestine. Their clothing needs were supplied largely by Yemen and Syria. At that time, besides clothes, spices, animals and slaves were also put up for sale.

People who accepted Islam in the beginning were generally the weak and helpless. They had virtually no supporters or sympathizers. So the infidels got away with torturing them brutally. With ropes strung round their legs they were dragged on the stony ground of the desert. They stripped poor Muslims naked and threw them on the burning sand and often red embers, and heavy stones were placed on their bodies. They forced them to stand under the

blazing sun. Bilal was also one of those who were tortured in this manner.

One day Abu Jahl's slave and Bilal were resting besides the wall of the Kaaba. Bilal saw the Prophet Muhammad walking towards a hill near the Kaaba with his head bent down. People said that in a cave in that hill an angel came and talked to him. When the Prophet passed by, Abu Sufyan was also there. Being a man of serious nature he was worried about the growing influence of the Prophet and of his followers which in his judgement, if allowed to grow unchecked, would prove of danger to the faith, prestige, customs and traditions of Mecca. That would also annoy their idols. He looked angrily at Abu Lahab and told him to take care of his nephew as he was a member of his family. Abu Lahab who was drunk at that time replied, "He is 40 years old and has no sense at all, he is my nephew but a blemish to the family. Yesterday he adopted his slave. Isn't this madness? He gives to the needy and feeds the poor. The people are making a fool out of him. He has given away goats and sheep also. No bagger ever goes empty handed from his door. If the nephew goes crazy what can the uncle do?" Greatly concerned he told Abu Sufyan that his nephew was a young man, strong and healthy, with a rich wife. Everyone respected him in the city. He could not understand why he went to the hill. He said that he was sure Muhammad would be shivering in the cold waiting for the angel that did not exist! On hearing this everyone was sure that he was mad. Abu Lahab told the crowd that previously Muhammad was respected by the people and they used to go to him

for guidance. Abu Sufyan told them that the idols would take care of him, but he, Abu Sufyan, was going to take care of all those slaves who were treading Muhammad's path.

During this conversation Ammaar came along. He was neither a slave nor a rich man but he had embraced Islam. Those cruel people grabbed him and threw him on the ground. They asked him what was it that the Prophet taught him. Ammaar replied calmly that he says "there is only one God, and Him alone should we worship. He is our creator and we are all equal."

Bilal was astonished when he heard this, because that meant that all of us were God's people and were equal. Ummayya, Ammaar, Abu Sufyan and Abu Lahab were all equal. Being a helpless slave Bilal heard this declaration with patience but Abu Sufyan was one of the chiefs of Mecca; how could he tolerate such a thing? He flew into passion. Bilal could not understand how Ammaar could be so courageous, Ammaar could also have said that Muhammad teaches us to pray, to tell the truth and be good to neighbours. Abu Sufyan owned a whip which he used on Ammaar's back and said, "Muhammad teaches that there is only one God? We have 360 gods who created us, they are the ones who protect us and give us sustenance. His anger knew no bounds and he kept walking back and forth in a rage but that was Bilal's moment of truth. He clearly saw a ray of hope for the slaves. Abu Sufyan kept shouting in anger that Muhammad did not understand that these very idols were the providers of

their livelihood. Every year tribes from all over Arabia gathered at Mecca to worship them and then they would buy idols like those from the Meccans to take away with them. Didn't the Meccans look after the poor and needy? Didn't Ammaar get his own share?

He told Ammaar that it would be disastrous for them if the One God of Muhammad took the place of their 360 gods. Allah cannot be seen nor heard, but Muhammad stated that he is everywhere, in the garden, in our houses, in Mecca, indeed in the sun and the moon.

During this conversation Bilal heard his master Ummayya's voice; frightened he staggered towards him. Ummayya asked Ammaar if he really meant what he said. He looked straight at him and told him that this is Bilal, his slave whom he had bought with money, was he equal to him? Bilal was quiet and did not dare think that he was equal to his master. Ammaar innocently replied that Muhammad taught them that all human beings, nations and races were equal. There was pin drop silence, all round!

Bilal then heard his master's furious voice. He had no idea that this very voice would change his life that day. Ummayya asked Bilal to tell Ammaar clearly, the difference between a Meccan Chief and Bilal. He then gave his whip to Bilal and ordered him to hit Ammaar on the face. Ammaar saw this and calmly turned his face towards him.

Bilal was so nervous that instead of Ammaar there was complete darkness in front of his eyes. But

after a moment when he recovered his senses he saw Ammaar standing in front of him motionless. At that very moment a change came over Bilal. Ummayya Bin Khalf now remained the Master of his body alone; Bilal's soul had been sold to Muhammad and he was proud of becoming his slave. As all eyes watched him, the whip fell down from Bilal's hand. They could not believe what Bilal had done. He had defied his master. Ammaar took the whip and gave it to Bilal and asked him to whip him or Ummayya would kill him, but Bilal threw the whip down and there was peace and tranquility on his face. He calmly looked at Abu Sufyan, and for the first time dared to look at Abu Sufyan's wife Hinda who gave a cynical smile. Ummayya was dumbfounded with anger. Nothing could be more shocking to him than the fact that his own slave should go over to the new faith. Recovering from the shock Ummayya retorted at Bilal that his home was only for his idols and there was no place in it for any other God. He looked at the setting sun and told him that he would sort him out the next day in the blazing sun. Bilal's hands were then tied, and a rope put round his neck and he was put in a room where he awaited his death.

As he lay there he remembered his father who worked laboriously for a dyer, and due to constant hardwork he had aged much before his time. He also remembered his mother who died of some illness. His parents were brought from Habsha, situated across the Red Sea. They never told him how they became slaves. His mother had once told him that they were free when she conceived him, by the time Bilal was born they had become slaves.

In that dark cell, in great pain Bilal waited for the sun to rise. Mecca's sun brought a message of death to the guilty. Then he remembered Ammaar and wondered whether he had got him punished. But it was not so, Ammaar had given the whip to Bilal so that he could escape punishment. It was Bilal's own decision not to whip him. But slaves never made decisions, they always acted upon decisions taken by other people. He wondered whether his defiance was due to bravery or stupidity, but it was neither, the reason being the Prophet himself.

Bilal had seen the Prophet Muhammad several times but never spoke to him. After Hajj and celebrations of other fairs, life at Mecca would become normal. People would walk past Bilal not caring for him or other slaves, but the Prophet Muhammad was quite different, he was very friendly with the slaves.

He was illiterate, but as a thirsty man keeps looking for water, Bilal that day was in quest of the Truth. He told himself that people say that a man looks for God, but that is not true. God Himself chooses a person and then guides him. No one can find Him until God wills it Himself. That night with the will of God Bilal submitted to Him and entered the fold of Islam.

Now his ropes, his pain and suffering gave him pleasure and happiness. His soul was at peace. He had submitted himself completely to the One God - Allah and awaited His mercy.

The next day Ummayya and his people came to

fetch him for punishment. They expected that Bilal would beg them for mercy, but instead he thanked them. They thought he was crazy. How could they understand that Bilal now depended on the One God - Allah, whatever they did to him now would be with the will of God and Bilal had submitted himself completely to Him. He would endure everything with patience.

Nothing could stop Ummayya's ruthless hand. He devised novel tortures to overpower Bilal's faith. Nobody likes cruelty and oppression, people closed their windows as Bilal was dragged in the streets. They knew that Bilal had disobeyed and defied his master. Ummayya bin Khalf had invested his money on him, now Bilal would have to pay the price for his defiance. Ummayya wanted to set an example for the other slaves.

Bilal was not an human being but a two legged animal for them now. They laid him on the ground and Ummayya took out his whip, what happened next is a painful story. Bilal could see his death glaring at him.

He was forced to lie on hot sand and boys were made to dance on his chest. Ummayya was whipping and torturing his body but how could he whip his soul?

Exasperated, Ummayya handed Bilal to the street urchins, asking them to put a cord round his neck and drag him through the town over sharp stones. Bilal's body bled, but careless about his safety he went on muttering "Ahad Ahad" i.e. "God is One,

God is One." He was being tortured but he did not ask them for mercy, instead he asked Allah for His Mercy and His Grace. If he had died that day Ummayya would have been grieved not for Bilal's life but for the loss of his money.

No amount of persecution could drive the Religion of Truth out of his heart. They kept a heavy mill stone on his chest. His back was burned by the hot sand. He was on the verge of death. His tongue hung out with thirst. Bilal's master Ummayya tortured him thus and then asked him to renounce Allah and the Prophet Muhammad and sing the praises of the Meccan gods, Lat and Uzza. But Bilal only said Ahad, Ahad, God is One, God is One.

They wanted him to make statements which suited the infidel's purpose. But he displayed unflinching self-control, patience and perseverance. They practiced all sorts of cruelties to divert Bilal from the True Faith but could not succeed. Allah had endowed Bilal with a righteous nature and he remained true to it throughout his life. There was no form of threat which was not held out to him, and there was no form of torture which the infidels did not inflict on him, but Bilal on the face of all this stood firm to his faith.

Bilal's master often tied him and threw him down and flung a stone or cow hide over him. The infidels tied a rope around his neck and allowed the street urchins to drag him to and fro between the two hills of Mecca. The Meccans felt amazed at the Negro slave's unshakeable faith. Even the ruthless Ummayya bin Khalf came to feel that Bilal was made

of a fiber that would not bend. However he did not relax the persecution. One noon as Bilal lay on the burning sand, calmly suffering the ordeal, Abu Bakr happened to pass by. This heart rending plight was too much for the kind hearted Abu Bakr who came to his rescue. "How long will you oppress this poor fellow?" said Abu Bakr to Ummayya bin Khalf.

As Bilal lay senseless he could hear voices making a bargain. One was the harsh and curt voice of Ummayya bin Khalf and the other was a soft and gentle voice. He regained a little consciousness and tried to open his eyes but could not do so because of the bright sunshine, and once again his eyes closed but he could hear voices mentioning Dirhams. The life of the people of Mecca revolved around the Dirham. But Bilal had lost all interest in life and just wanted to sleep peacefully.

He then heard Abu Sufyan saying that bargaining of a slave was not allowed during his punishment. It was against the custom of Mecca. But Ummayya replied that he was already dead. If Abu Bakr was interested in buying his dead body for hundred Dirhams it was not a bad bargain at all. The conversation then stopped. Abu Bakr went close to Bilal and called out his name. In spite of the bright sunshine Bilal opened his eyes and looked at him. Ummayya bin Khalf was startled when he found that Bilal was alive, his eyes started shining and he shouted "he is alive, he is alive, now I shall charge 200 Dirhams."

Bilal felt the ropes being untied, the millstone was removed from his chest. Bilal was once again

sold. He felt a young man helping him but could not see him. He tried to recognise him, it was Zaid - the Prophet's adopted son. Bilal did not have the strength to speak, neither was it required.

Zaid consoled him saying that the chains of slavery were broken forever. Ummayya bin Khalf happily counted the money and taunted Abu Bakr that he would have been quite satisfied with a 100 dirhams for the fellow, and roared with laughter.

Bilal looked at the saintly Abu Bakr as he told Ummayya - "You are quite mistaken, if you had asked for a thousand Dirhams as ransom, I would have readily paid that too."

Abu Bakr and Zaid took him home. Five days were spent in agony and he remained mostly unconscious. His wounds were treated with different medicines. He remembered someone praying in the room. On the fifth day he felt a little better and was capable of going out for some fresh air. Abu Bakr was very pleased. He fed him with goat's milk and told him that the Prophet of Allah had sat beside him for three days and did not leave until his temperature had come down and he was out of danger. He told Bilal that he had never seen such a fortunate man before. Bilal had embraced Islam and was now a Muslim. The next day he would take him to the Prophet.

Bilal was the first slave who declared himself a Muslim. He was proud of the fact that he was one of the first nine people who embraced Islam. He was considered amongst the very few who were raised to

an exalted status. By enduring all sorts of atrocities and humiliation in the path of love for Allah and his Prophet Bilal set an example and lit a beacon light which will shine till the end of the world for the seekers after Truth and Righteousness. He knew well the consequences of renouncing idol worship and offering devotion to the One God - Allah, yet so deep was the imprint of a righteous life and the unparalleled moral example of the Prophet upon his heart that no degree of savage oppression and violence could blot it out.

It is stated that Abu Bakr bought Bilal on the advice of Allah's Messenger. The Prophet also offered him half of the price in order to mitigate the burden of Abu Bakr. But he begged pardon from the Prophet for not accepting his offer and Abu Bakr himself emancipated Bilal. He then appointed Bilal as his store-keeper. While Bilal was serving Abu Bakr, he was fortunate in that he was taught how to read and write by Abu Bakr himself. In those days ink for writing was prepared manually, by dissolving certain dyes into water. One day while Bilal was busy preparing ink with his hands, Abu Bakr entered the room, walked upto Bilal, gently took hold of his hands and kissed them. Bilal taken aback, retrieved his hands. Kissing someone's hands, among the Arabs was an expression of extreme reverence. Bilal could make out no cause for this kind of gesture from Abu Bakr, his emancipator. Seeing Bilal bewildered Abu Bakr proceeded to explain, I have heard from the Messenger of Allah, that the ink of a scholar's pen is holier than the blood of a martyr. Later on Bilal served the Messenger of Allah.

The Prophet treated him with so much honour and respect that Umar used to call him "Sayyedna Bilal" which was a title of respect. All the Muslims treated him with so much reverence that he felt like a King now. Even the great leaders of the time envied him for the opportunity he got of serving the Prophet Muhammad. The incident of Mairaj, the spiritual journey of the Prophet to the heavens, took place one year before Hijra. Bilal had served the messenger of Allah for almost eleven years and during that period Bilal had made great spiritual progress. Following the Mairaj the Prophet asked Bilal one day, "What great virtue do you possess, Bilal? for I have seen you ahead of me in Paradise and I could hear your footsteps wherever I went during the Mairaj." Bilal replied humbly, "O, messenger of Allah I have no virtue except that throughout my life I have tried not to sin, and if ever I do any wrong, at once I perform ablution (Wuzu) and say two Rakaa't Nawafil Prayer, and implore God for His forgiveness and mercy. And I always try to retain my Wuzu (ablution). Whenever the state of ablution lapses I immediately regain it by performing Wuzu, and I offer two Rakaa't prayer. Then I turn my attention towards Allah and believe with heart and soul that all actions and deeds are implemented with the support of divine help and guidance. O Prophet of Allah, I do not possess anything beside this." The Prophet replied, "O Bilal, this is the cause of your good fortune and blessings."

In Madina, Bilal would get extremely emotional while narrating this incident to the companions and he always had tears in his eyes. Perhaps his

precedence in accepting Islam changed everything for Bilal. Attaining the love and affection of Allah and his Messenger became the main object of his life.

When the Prophet Muhammad granted permission to his companions to migrate, Bilal, along with the companions of the Prophet migrated to Medina. There Bilal lived in the same house with Abu Bakr and Aamir bin Fahria. In Medina when the Prophet established the bond of brotherhood between the Muhajireen (migrants) and Ansar i.e. Helpers. Bilal and Abu Rouwaiha were declared brothers unto each other.

When Muslims settled in Medina and were able to live and worship in comparative peace the Prophet appointed Bilal a "Muezzin" the official who calls the worshippers to prayers. Being an African Bilal missed the (h) in the Arabic word "Ash- Hadu" (I bear witness). Medinites laughed at his defective pronunciation, but the Prophet rebuked them and told them how dear Bilal was to God for the stout faith he showed under Meccan tortures. He had a resonant high pitched voice which had a hypnotic quality, that exerted a strange pull on hearts. The moment people heard Bilal's Azan (call to prayers) they left their jobs and came running to the mosque. On hearing the Azan the Prophet of Allah would come for leading the prayers. Bilal would say the "Iqama" before the prayers commenced. While going to Salat-e-Eid or Salat-e-Istisqa (prayer for rain) Bilal used to walk ahead of the Prophet holding a spear in his hand, and would pitch it on the ground one or two yards away from the place where the Prophet

wished to lead the congregation of the prayer. The spear was one of those three sent by the King of Abyssinia in homage to the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him). The Prophet gifted one of the three spears to Umar and kept the third one for himself. Thus Bilal had the honour of keeping the Prophet's spear throughout his life time.

One day while the Prophet was sitting in the mosque at Medina Abdur Rehman and his brother, the sons of Abu Bakeer (one of the companions of the Prophet) came to him and said, "O Messenger of Allah! Our sister is of marriageable age. Please suggest some suitable match for her. The Prophet thought for a moment and then said, "why don't you marry her to Bilal?" Hearing this the young men went away quietly. A few days later they came again with the same request, and the Prophet gave the same reply. Again they left without any comment. After a few days they came for the third time with the same request. This time again the Prophet giving the same reply added, "Bilal is an inmate of Paradise, you should marry your sister to him." On hearing this Abdur Rehman exclaimed, "O Messenger of Allah! we gladly accept your choice, the girl will be most happy to be the life companion of a man for whom you have such unbounded regard." So she was married to Bilal.

Bilal took more wives after this marriage. According to Qatadah he married a lady of the tribe of Banu Zuhra. It is also recorded that one of his wives was Hin-ul-Khulania who belonged to Yemen. Bilal had no issue from any of his wives.

Once Bilal related to his wife a tradition of the Prophet but his wife expressed some doubts about the authenticity of his report. Bilal was annoyed with her and went to the Prophet and recounted his dispute with his wife. The Prophet went with him to his house and observed to his wife, "You should take Bilal's word for any tradition of mine, and do not give him cause for anger."

As in Mecca so in Medina Bilal could not endure separation from the Prophet. Bilal always accompanied him and stood by the side of the Prophet in all the Holy wars. The battle of Badr was the first trial of strength for Islam. The Muslims found themselves pitched against overwhelming odds. But their unwavering faith carried the day. Bilal also had the opportunity to strike off the head of his former master Ummayya-bin-Khalf. When Abu Bakr learnt of this he exclaimed, "Hail O Bilal! How apt is Divine justice."

It is reported in the traditions that the Prophet paid close attention to the education and training of Bilal. Once the Prophet said, "O Bilal, the best deed a believer can perform is to struggle for the cause of Allah." The Prophet also taught him to be humble. He said, "O Bilal, always live in humility and with contentment and die with those who feel contented."

The Prophet off and on gave him instructions concerning distribution of surplus wealth with him i.e. the Prophet. He would say, "Bilal a quantity of wealth has accumulated with me. I do not wish to keep it, so take it and give it away to the needy, so

that my heart may be relieved of the burden." Actually the messenger of Allah intended to teach Bilal by example how a man should cultivate the virtue of contentment in life and abstain from wealth. Bilal observed with great attention all the instructions and precedents of the Prophet and proved to be a true follower and a devotee of the Prophet till the end of his life. He was in constant attendance on the Prophet, because he derived delight from his sight, love and kindness. He performed the duties of an attendant on the Prophet under all conditions, during the journeys and in camps, in war and peace, but was never treated like a servant by the Prophet. Bilal expressed deep devotion for his Master and Leader. He could not bear the slightest discomfort for the Prophet and was always ready to respond to his Master's call. Throughout the battles he kept running between the Prophet's camp and the battlefields, bearing communications, orders and instructions from the Prophet to the troops.

Bilal witnessed the beginning era of Islam when his Master the Prophet Muhammad led a life of suffering and persecution. He was also witness to the occasion when the Prophet Muhammad entered Mecca victoriously with 10,000 followers and before entering the city announced "Whoever takes shelter in the house of Abu Sufyan will have peace, whoever enters the Sacred Mosque will have peace. Those who lay down their arms will have peace. Those who close their doors and stay in will have peace. Those who stay in the house of Hakim bin Hizam will have peace."

Saying this he called Abu Rouwaiha and handed over to him the Standard of Islam. Abu Rouwaiha had entered into a pact of brotherhood with Bilal, the Negro slave.

Handing over the Standard the Prophet said, "Whoever stands under this Standard will have peace." At the same time he ordered Bilal to march in front of Abu Rouwaiha and announce to all concerned that there was peace under that Standard.

The arrangement was full of wisdom. When Muslims were persecuted in Mecca, Bilal, one of their targets was dragged about the streets by ropes tied to his legs. Mecca gave no peace to Bilal, but only physical pain, humiliation and disgrace. How revengeful Bilal must have felt on this day of his deliverance. To let him avenge the savage cruelties suffered by him in Mecca was necessary, but it had to be within the limits laid by Islam. Accordingly the Prophet did not let Bilal draw the sword and smite the necks of his former persecutors. That would have been against the spirit of Islam. Instead the Prophet handed to Bilal's brother the Standard of Islam, and charged Bilal with the duty of offering peace to all his former persecutors under the Standard borne by his brother. There was beauty and appeal in this revenge. We have to picture Bilal marching in front of his brother and inviting his enemies to peace. His passion for revenge could not have lasted. It must have dissolved as he advanced inviting Meccans to peace under a Standard held aloft by his brother. Never before were the slaves treated with so much dignity, honour and respect as

Bilal on that day!

After the victorious entry into the city of Mecca, when the Prophet entered the Holy Ka'aba there were three men accompanying him, one of them was Bilal, the other two were Usman Bin Talha, the key bearer of the Holy Ka'aba, and Usman bin Zaid . Bilal was ordered to climb on top of the Ka'aba and recite the Azan i.e. the call to prayer. Soon the whole valley was echoing and resounding with the hypnotic note of the Negro Companion's Azan. Heads cast down, Bilal's persecutors of yesterday sat outside, hardly believing their eyes and ears.

Bilal's love for the Master was unlimited. He took delight in serving him as best as he could. One day he bought for him some high quality dates. "Bilal", asked the Prophet a little surprised, "where from did you get these dates?" Bilal replied that his own dates were of low quality, so he exchanged two measures of his dates with one measure of these. The Prophet remarked that he should never do that again.

Bilal was respected for his complete honesty and integrity. On account of this the Prophet Muhammad entrusted him with the management of the Bait-ul-Mal i.e. the State Treasury. He was also incharge of the Prophet's household.

At the time of the Prophet's death also he remained close at hand and was included amongst the selected few who performed the funeral rites of the Prophet . It was Bilal who sprinkled water from a skin-bag over the grave of the Prophet (peace and

blessings of God be upon him) and thus gained the rare privilege of administering the last funeral rites.

After the death of the Prophet whenever Bilal pronounced the name of the Prophet Muhammad while calling the Azan, he could not bear the absence of his Master. He would burst into uncontrollable tears. His audience too stricken with grief would break down. He felt oppressed in Medina without the Prophet, so he requested Abu Bakr, the then Caliph, to release him of the duty of calling the Azan and grant him leave to go to Syria with the Mujahideen (soldiers). As a true Muslim Bilal believed that the greatest good one could do was to wage life-long war for the cause of the Truth. He told Abu Bakr (may God be pleased with him), "I heard the messenger of Allah declare that the best thing a Muslim could do was to take part in Holy wars. My wish is that I devote the rest of my life to this noble cause."

"I fully agree with you," said Abu Bakr, "but pray, stay on in Medina a little more. I am an old man and badly need your help." Bilal was moved by the Caliph's appeal and decided not to join the conquering armies of Islam during the caliphate of Abu Bakr.

Bilal was assigned some State duties. It is recorded in History that when the second caliph Umar bin Khattab called upon Khalid-bin-Waleed (the Sword of Allah) to explain in connection with some of his alleged irregularities and errors, it was Bilal who took off Khalid's turban from his head and tied his hands with it in open assembly and did

not untie him until Khalid had furnished a satisfactory explanation of all the charges leveled against him. After this he offered his sincere apology to Khalid .

When Umar took over as Caliph, in spite of being quite old Bilal resolved to forsake his peaceful life in Medina and devote the rest of his days to Holy Wars in far away lands. So he sought the Caliph's permission to proceed to the front. Umar tried hard to keep him back but Bilal would not listen. So Umar (may God be pleased with him) had to grant his request and Bilal joined the Syrian Campaign. He was with the army that sought the capitulation of Jerusalem. However, the Caliph had to come in person to sign the treaty of peace with the defenders of the city. Bilal walked by the side of Umar, as he entered the Holy City. When the prayer time drew near, the caliph requested Bilal to call people to prayer. "Commander of the faithful!" said Bilal, "after the death of the Master (peace and blessing of God be upon him), I decided to recite the Azan no more. I have stood by this decision to this day. But I must bow to your wish today". So Bilal started chanting the Azan in his hypnotic melodious voice. The effect was indescribable. Bilal's Azan recalled graphically the cherished memories of the Prophet's days, a great excitement was observed amongst the people. Everyone rushed to the mosque with great devotion in a frenzied state of mind. The whole congregation burst into tears. Umar, Abu Obaida, Muaz-bin-Jabal and the bravest of warriors of Islam could not check themselves. All of them started weeping like children.

At the successful end of the Syrian Campaign Bilal settled in Syria. There he cultivated a small piece of land and lived on its produce. In Syria, Bilal took a second wife. He sought the hand of an Arab lady. He plainly told her family that he was a Negro, was once a slave, was the son of a slave and possessed no riches. Bilal's request was readily accepted and he married the Arab lady of his choice.

Bilal's piety and transparent sincerity had won him the highest esteem in people's hearts but he remained as humble as ever. If any one praised him in his presence he at once said, "I am a Negro who was a mere slave till lately".

In Syria one night he saw the Master in a dream. "Bilal", said the Prophet, "how come you have not paid me a visit all these years?"

The dream made Bilal so restless that at the break of day he immediately set off. Standing by the grave of the Prophet, he wept earnestly. The memories of the glorious past came flooding back and Bilal found himself lost in a world of ecstasy. When he recovered himself, he saw the two grandsons of the Prophet standing close by. Getting hold of them, he embraced them and started weeping again. When Bilal calmed down Hasan and Hussain made a joint request that the Negro Companion should recite the Azan on the following morning. Bilal could not refuse the request of the beloved grandsons of the Prophet. So before dawn on the following day, he climbed on the roof of the mosque and began his memorable Azan. In no time the whole of Medina was astir. Men and women rushed

to the house-tops to imbibe fully the magical effect of Bilal's Azan. The event was remembered in the city long afterwards.

Bilal's closeness to the Prophet won him universal respect. There is another episode that reveals the high esteem in which Bilal was held by Umar. It is stated that one day Abu Sufyan Bin Harb, Suhail-bin-Amr and some other prominent Arab chiefs came to the Caliph for interview. Bilal and Sohaib (an ex-slave) also arrived to meet the Caliph. When Umar learnt of their arrival he called in Bilal and Sohaib at once and the Arab Chiefs, who had come earlier, stood waiting outside. Abu Sufyan could not restrain himself and turning to his companions remarked, "It was our fate to endure this disgrace. The slaves are admitted to audience while we the nobles of Arabia stay at the door". At this, Ikrama, the son of Abu Jahl, burst out, "The Messenger of Allah called us all to the path of Truth. We responded to his call very late. Those who responded earlier certainly got a lead on us. We have no cause to grumble now."

Suhail-bin-Amr retorted, "But who is to be blamed for this? The Messenger of Allah invited us all with one voice but we refused his call and offered severe resistance to him. On the other hand these slaves came forward and made a positive response. It is their right now to get preference over us in this world and the next, we have no cause for complaint." Such is the rock foundation on which Islamic equality rests. Despite all its misfortunes the Muslim world to this day boasts of a human equality which

in the "advanced" West is still a dream. Racial prejudice is one of the most deep rooted failings. Modern man has conquered space and has produced countless miracles of technology but has failed to uproot racism. Science and technology have armed him with formidable power but have failed to re-orient his nature. Human nature can discover its true perspective only by turning to Islam, the religion of truth and common sense.

During the caliphate of Umar when registers of salaries and allowances were being prepared, the Caliph dispatched a letter to Bilal - who was with the army in Syria - asking him to intimate with whom his name should be entered.

"Enter my name with Abu Rauwaiha whom I shall never abandon on account of the fraternal bond established by the Prophet between him and me," replied Bilal.

Among the people Bilal's credibility was so high that they would rather disbelieve their own eyes than cast doubts on Bilal's report of any tradition of the Prophet because he paid the greatest regard to truth in all matters concerning the actions or precepts of the Prophet.

When Abu Rouwaiha his brother in Islam, wanted to marry a lady of a respectable tribe, he requested Bilal to intercede on his behalf. Bilal went with him to the guardians of the bride, and told them in clear terms, "I am Bilal-bin-Ribah and this is my brother Abu Rouwaiha, who wants to establish matrimonial relations with you. So I must point out

that he is a very hot tempered man. It is up to you to give your daughter in marriage to him or refuse." Hearing this clear cut testimony of Bilal, the parents of the Bride accepted the proposal of Abu Rouwaiha for they could not disregard Bilal's recommendation.

Bilal because of his sincerity was an extremist by nature. He loved intensely and hated intensely. He loved intensely Allah and His Prophet and was deeply devoted to Islam, but he was at the same time, a staunch foe of the infidels and polytheists, and he never tried to hide his feelings and contempt for them.

In the closing phase of his life Bilal completely disassociated himself from public life.

In the year 20 of Hijra, Bilal died of an epidemic in Damascus at the age of 70. It is stated that he was of the same age as Abu Bakr. On his death bed he was very glad at the prospect of meeting his Master the Prophet Muhammad and his companions who had already passed away. When his wife began to cry by his bedside he comforted her saying, "Do not cry, why do you weep, I am looking forward to seeing my Master, the Prophet and other companions after such a long separation. If Allah wills, I shall meet them all tomorrow." And he expired the next day. (Inna-lillah-e-Wa'Inna-Ilai-he-Raje-oon).

He was buried in Damascus near Bab-as-Sagheer. His tomb even today is the favourite resort of crowds of visitors. People high and low come to pay homage at his grave. Bilal left no legacy in the

form of material wealth or off-spring, but he left a spiritual memorial which is unique in the world, that is Azan. The call to the prayer has been recited continuously in the world, for the last fourteen hundred years of Islam and as the people hear the call it recalls to the mind the memory of the first Muezzin of Islam, Bilal-bin-Ribah (may God be pleased with him).

From a persecuted slave Bilal rose to a position of honour that became the envy of many a Quraish chief. But he remained totally unassuming all his life. O' Almighty Allah shower upon him your blessings, and guide us the way you guided him. Amen.